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Amie Fabry

Edith Cowan University, a.fabry@ecu.edu.au

Lennie Barblett

Edith Cowan University, l.barblett@ecu.edu.au

Marianne Knaus

Edith Cowan University, m.knaus@ecu.edu.au

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The role of early childhood pedagogical leaders in schools: Leading change for ongoing improvement

Amie Fabry, Lennie Barblett and Marianne Knaus
Edith Cowan University,

Abstract

Early childhood pedagogical practice in primary schools is often challenged by academic demands, debate about best practice and ongoing change through new policy initiatives. This paper reports an investigation of how early childhood pedagogical leaders assist early years teachers in schools to embrace change and embed early childhood pedagogy. Framed within a constructivist epistemology, this paper reports on findings from three case studies drawn from a larger mixed-methods study from Perth, Western Australia. Data collected through shadowing pedagogical leaders, undertaking contextual interviews and analysing school documents revealed that pedagogical change was promoted, encouraged and sustained through a number of strategies. These included utilising early childhood champions, developing relational trust with staff, establishing communities of practice and empowering teachers as decision-makers. This paper highlights the critical role early childhood pedagogical leadership can play in recognising the professional capability of early childhood teachers to drive ongoing improvement in school contexts.

Keywords: Early childhood education, pedagogical leadership, school, teacher, improvement

Background

Early childhood pedagogical leadership (ECPL) is becoming increasingly pertinent in the current climate of government interest, policy reform and contested debate about how to best improve outcomes for children. Disputes about early childhood pedagogy present a challenge for teachers working in the early years, particularly those working in school contexts where rapid academic achievement is promoted (Bradbury, 2019). The National Quality Standard (NQS) stipulates the early childhood education and care sector have an educational leader (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], n.d). In school contexts, early childhood leadership is not a requirement, and schools are not accountable to ensure programming and planning in the early years is led by an early

childhood qualified leader. The Western Australian school landscape presents one such example.

In Western Australia (WA), the Kindergarten year is non-compulsory and while many early childhood education and care (ECEC) services offer a Kindergarten program, Kindergarten is largely considered to be the first year of school. At 3.5 to 4 years of age, WA Kindergarten children are the youngest to start school in Australia. The first year of compulsory schooling, Pre-primary (Foundation equivalent) enables children from 4.5 to 5 years old to commence full time school. In Kindergarten, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) in its entirety and an abridged version of the NQS (ACECQA, n.d), are used. For Pre-primary, Year 1 and 2 the Principles and Practices of the EYLF as well as the abridged NQS are used, along with the WA Curriculum and Assessment Framework (School Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA], n.d). Even though the pedagogy of the EYLF is well described, these year levels are subjected to contested debates about pedagogy and practice. Teachers are faced with complex challenges of navigating policy implementation, meeting whole school requirements and increased pressure to ensure children are achieving academic outcomes (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020).

The intersect between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and school is fuelled with pedagogical challenges, yet evidence indicates the quality of pedagogy is significantly related to the quality of leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006). While still an emerging field of research, ECPL has been found to assist teachers and educators to build deeper and shared understandings of pedagogical practice and foster ongoing improvement in early childhood contexts through leading organisational change (Heikka et al., 2013, 2019). There is, however a dearth of research that specifically explores ECPL within school contexts. This study aims to contribute to this evolving body of research by sharing findings from three case studies that investigated ECPL and how it assisted teachers to improve evidence-based early childhood pedagogy in school settings.

Literature Review

Early childhood pedagogical leadership

Early childhood pedagogical leadership (ECPL) has been identified as a driver for improving the quality of educational programs and enhancing outcomes for children (Siraj & Hallet, 2014), yet ECPL remains a largely ambiguous term that is used variably in research literature. In this study, ECPL was investigated through an understanding that it provides a “bridge between research and practice” and involves “leadership for learning” (Siraj & Hallet, 2014, p. 113). Of particular focus in this study were the aspects of ECPL that assist teachers to build deeper and shared understandings of pedagogy and policy to enhance practice. ECPL was also understood to be largely influenced by the context in which it is enacted. Contextual influences include the leadership roles and responsibilities, power relationships between teachers and leaders, the qualifications and experience of the teachers and educators, structural elements such as time, and the children, families and community (Waniganayake, et al., 2019).

Descriptions of ECPL can be found in both international and national research. In the *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and the follow up *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector* (ELEYS) study (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006) found effective pedagogical leaders were visionary and transparent, developed positive relationships with staff, followed distributed models of leadership, and encouraged critical reflection and collaborative discussions to reach shared understandings. More recent studies have found similar elements of pedagogical leadership exist within ECEC settings. Leading improvement has been shown to involve building collaborative understandings of policy and practice and a focus on contextual implementation (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). Other researchers have found that distributed models of pedagogical leadership involve administrative and teaching staff working interdependently towards shared goals (Heikka 2014), developing trust through open dialogue and communication (Boe & Hognestad, 2017) and enabling educators to have ownership over pedagogical improvement (Kirk & Barblett, 2021). It has also been determined that early childhood pedagogical leaders require early childhood knowledge to interpret reforms, identify goals and lead change (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). In school contexts, however, early childhood knowledge is not always a characteristic of those who lead.

Pedagogical leadership in school settings is often the responsibility of the principal who may not have early childhood knowledge or experience (Barblett & Kirk, 2018). This poses a challenge for early years teachers when the principals' direction for practice and pedagogy goes against their own (Robert-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). In a study by Barblett et al. (2016), teachers reported being expected to 'teach in ways that clashed with their philosophical beliefs and did not allow for play-based learning' (p. 40) when principals did not have early childhood knowledge. Hesterman and Targowska (2020) similarly found teachers believed principals' lack of early childhood knowledge inhibited their ability to implement the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), particularly play-based learning.

With the NQS (ACECQA, n.d) being mandated in Western Australian schools from Kindergarten to Year Two, the role of ECPL needs closer attention. The *'Guide to implementing the NQS in WA public schools'* asserts that 'school administrators and educational leaders require knowledge and understanding of early years' pedagogy and curriculum' (p. 78), further stipulating that 'educational leaders guide and develop educators' and families' understandings about age-appropriate pedagogies and research endorsed intentional play-based approaches in the early years of schooling' (Department of Education, 2018, p.80). ECPL is therefore positioned as a critical role in schools to assist teachers as they navigate pedagogical tensions.

Pedagogical tension

Over the past decade, increased accountability through assessment and testing have surmounted to a gradual decline in play-based learning and a shift toward more formal school pedagogies being used to enhance children's academic outcomes (Bradbury, 2019). Reports from the United Kingdom describe a narrowed curriculum in which the majority of the day is spent on literacy and numeracy instruction. Alongside this is the introduction of ability grouping, and low "performing" children being labelled as "hopeless cases" (p.126) or as having additional learning needs to protect teachers from scrutiny (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). In Australia, the pushed down curriculum and expectations for academic achievement has led to a decrease in play based pedagogies (Barblett et al., 2016; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020), with teachers also reporting limiting children's contributions to the curriculum (Leggett & Ford, 2013). High-stakes testing such as NAPLAN

also imposes on pedagogy with reports that teachers spend more time on subjects that are assessed (Roberts et al., 2019). This trend known as 'schoolification' has been documented internationally and led to significant changes in early childhood pedagogy, due to conceptions of quality practice being cast as only those that can be measured and evaluated (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). Despite conclusive evidence on the importance of play (see Yogman et al., 2018), children's right to play and to initiate learning are being compromised. Consequently, teachers are left struggling with the ethical dilemma of whether to afford children these rights or comply with school and system pressure for formal learning (Palaiologou & Male, 2019).

Challenging professional identity

The contested debates surrounding play-based learning leaves many early childhood teachers advocating for the value of play-based learning within paradigms of performance and outcomes (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). In a study by Nolan and Paatsch (2018) teachers in the early years of school reported their professional identity was challenged because their pedagogical practice differed to their primary colleagues. Lynch (2015) similarly revealed that early years teachers experienced pressure by primary colleagues to have children academically ready for the next year of learning. The early childhood teachers also reported being regarded as 'lazy' by their primary years colleagues when they followed play-based approaches (Lynch, 2015).

Another challenge in realising early childhood pedagogy in schools has been teachers' response to ongoing policy reform and change. Armstrong (2019) found ECEC educators varied considerably, from being self-motivated to learn and adapt change, to being reluctant to embrace change due to feeling overwhelmed. Armstrong also found teachers' knowledge, training and their workplace impacted their response to change. Teachers' lack of knowledge, particularly in regards to play-based learning restricting pedagogical implementation has similarly been identified in other studies (see Khalil et al., 2022). Teachers' understanding of pedagogy and practice, however has been shown to be enhanced when ECPL is present (Colmer, 2017).

Methodology

A socio-cultural constructivist epistemology framed this study through the belief that people construct meaning through their interaction with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 2020). Vygotsky (1978) asserted that learning occurs through social interaction and dialogue where ideas and understandings are communicated and shared. Furthermore, he claimed that our understandings are shaped by our social, cultural and historical backgrounds. This study sought to understand how ECPL is enacted as a socially and culturally constructed process to assist teachers' pedagogical knowledge and implementation. The researchers recognise that the social and cultural components of each unique school context shape the role of ECPL and the dialogical exchanges that take place between ECPLs and teachers as they assist teachers to embrace change. Data collection included gaining contextual information from participants within each school as well as observing interactions between early childhood pedagogical leaders, teachers and school executive staff. This data enabled the researchers to generate meaning about participant experiences with and of ECPL from multiple perspectives, acknowledging that individual participants may have different experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This paper reports on three case studies in which ECPL was examined as part of a larger doctoral research study. Case study methodology has been largely used within educational research to gain in-depth understanding about authentic contexts (see Barblett & Kirk, 2018; Gibbs, 2020). ECPL was examined in each case to understand who held responsibility for the role and how they assisted teachers to implement EYLF pedagogy (DEEWR, 2009) in school settings.

Sample

Case studies were conducted as the third and final stage of the research project. Three primary schools were selected for examination where previous findings indicated that ECPL was evident and effective in assisting Kindergarten and Pre-primary teachers to implement EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) pedagogy. This determination was made through the analysis of survey and interview data from previous phases of the research and where the findings could be verified by multiple participants from each school. To ensure each of the three school sectors was represented, one school from Catholic Education, Education Department and

Independent school systems were invited to participate as a case study. The schools were all situated in the Perth Metropolitan area and ranged in the size of staff and children (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information of Schools

School	Number of children	Kindergarten and Pre-primary classes	Kindergarten and Pre-primary teachers	Executive staff
A	770	4 Kindergarten 4 Pre-primary	2 Kindergarten 5 Pre-Primary	1 principal 3 deputies
B	220	1 Pre-Kindergarten 1 Kindergarten 1 Pre-Primary	1 Pre-Kindergarten 1 Kindergarten 1 Pre-Primary	1 principal 2 deputies
C	587	2 Pre-Kindergarten 3 Kindergarten 3 Pre-primary	2 Pre-Kindergarten 3 Kindergarten 3 Pre-primary	1 principal 1 deputy

Data collection

ECPL was examined for three or four days in each school, dependent on participant availability. During this time data was collected through multiple sources to provide triangulation and enhance accuracy of the findings (Yin, 2014).

Shadowing the early childhood pedagogical leaders allowed for observations of the role as it existed in its natural setting (Boe & Hognestad, 2017). Participants were observed as they undertook duties associated with ECPL such as planning, leading meetings and interacting with colleagues. This included engaging in both planned and informal interactions with Kindergarten and/or Pre-primary teachers or the principal or deputy principal. In School A and B observations were conducted over 3 consecutive days. In School C observations took place over 2 consecutive days, followed by two half days in the following weeks.

Observations of the participants actions and comments were recorded as written notes by the researcher.

Contextual interviews involved asking questions of the early childhood pedagogical leaders to understand the intentions behind their actions that were observed in the context of their everyday work (Boe & Hognestad, 2017). Where consent was granted, teachers and school executive staff also participated in interviews, describing their perspectives of the early childhood pedagogical leaders and their role in their school context.

Document analysis contributed to the data collected from each setting. Content from school policies, documents and websites pertaining to early childhood pedagogy, practice and leadership were gathered to assist in understanding each school context and the elements that contribute to the enactment of ECPL (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data analysis

Observation notes, contextual interviews and school documents were analysed for each case, utilising inductive and deductive coding. Data was initially sorted into groups, assigned inductive codes and main themes were identified through a method of constant comparison (Miles et al., 2014). Throughout the data collection and analysis, memos were written to assist the researcher to make sense of the data that emerged (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2014). Each case was individually written and built from the analysis of data. Following an initial analysis of each individual case, cases were compared and contrasted to one another through cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014) looking for similarities and differences between them. Identified themes that emerged from the data were then compared to deductive themes determined by the literature to clarify meaning and determine where further evidence may have been required (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers acknowledge that their own knowledge and experiences shaped the interpretation of data.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was received from Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to collecting data from participants (number 19301). Ethics approval was also obtained from the Western Australian Education Department and from the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. In the Independent School sector permission is sought directly from the school principal. Written consent was obtained from the principal and nominated early childhood pedagogical leader of each school. Consent was also obtained from staff members such as teachers, education assistants and school executive

staff, who were observed interacting with the observed participants or who participated in contextual interviews. Pseudonyms and member checking were used to maintain participant and school anonymity and enhance the reliability of the data (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Early childhood pedagogical leadership was found to involve leading a process of change; a responsibility distributed between principals and early childhood champions. In School A, pedagogical change focused on implementing play-based learning. In School B and C, pedagogical change was through a broader focus of implementing and improving practice in line with the NQS. All schools also reported an endeavour to enhance children’s agency. While the focus differed slightly across the three schools, leading pedagogical change involved three common elements: building relational trust; collaborative professional learning and reflection; and empowering teachers as decision-makers.

Early childhood champions

Pedagogical change was driven by early childhood champions in each school who shared the responsibility for ECPL with the principal. The early childhood champions (hereafter referred to as champions) were experienced early childhood teachers, with knowledge of early childhood research and policy, however they were not all early childhood trained. With the exception of one male principal, the remaining principals and all champions were female and ranged between the age of 40 to 68 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Distribution of ECPL

<i>School</i>	<i>Name (Role)</i>	<i>Number of years leading pedagogy</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>
<i>A</i>	Laura (Principal)	7	Master of Education
	Cassie (Champion/Pre-primary teacher)	1	Graduate Diploma of Education
<i>B</i>	Angela (Principal)	6	Diploma of Education (Primary), Bachelor of Education

C	Stacey (Champion/Teacher)	4	Bachelor of Arts (ECE), Master of Education PhD (in progress)
	Tom (Principal)	7	Master of Education
	Liz (Champion/Pre-primary teacher)	7	Bachelor of Education (Primary)

The principals played a pivotal role in advocating for and encouraging improvement to early childhood pedagogy and practice. They recognised, however, their limited early childhood knowledge and experience and explained the critical role of champions in assisting their colleagues to develop deeper understandings of policy, research and practice. This was illustrated by principal Tom (School C) who commented, “I’m not an early years trained person so I guess I rely heavily on [Liz].” Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018) argue that specialist knowledge has an ‘indispensable role to play’ in leading improvement. They further posit that teachers are left ‘adrift’ without leaders who have solid understandings of relevant research and policy (p. 21). Researchers maintain that without knowledgeable early childhood pedagogical leaders to assist teachers to navigate the complexity of implementing pedagogical practice, children’s rights and access to high-quality early childhood education may be overpowered by pressure for academic achievement and formalised learning (Gibbs, 2020; Palaiologou & Male, 2019). Supporting teachers in their leadership development contributed to the success of distributed leadership.

Building the teachers’ leadership capacity was pivotal in the teacher becoming an agent of change. This was described by principal Laura, (School A) who said,

We find the leaders, we find them first and then build the capacity and then give them small opportunities to find their feet, and move forward, and then they grow.

And then all of a sudden, they are the change agent.

Champions were given authentic opportunities to lead collaborative meetings, mentor colleagues and share practice. Colmer et al. (2014) propose that school leaders play a critical role in not only sharing leadership responsibility but also in developing leadership capability. While teachers were regarded as influential leaders, the champions described principals as pivotal to enabling change.

The principals' commitment to pedagogical improvement resulted in shared goals deemed necessary to effectively lead teachers through change. Champions specified principals held aligned pedagogical goals and supported their role, noting "I need to be backed up" (Cassie, School A), and "I'm blessed to have management that believe in early childhood, and that is very rare" (Liz, School C). These findings replicate previous research that found the implementation and sustainability of change was determined by the commitment of principals (Kirk & Barblett, 2021). Distributed models generate collective leadership that empowers teachers to also take ownership of improving pedagogical practice, resulting in greater acceptance of and sustainability in change (O'Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018). In these schools the shared responsibility for ECPL also generated shared understandings of early childhood pedagogy between school executive and teachers. Both principals and champions acknowledged that leading pedagogical change involved establishing relational trust.

Establishing relational trust

Relational trust was considered the cornerstone for leading pedagogical improvement with participants determining relationships "the very beginning of any change" (principal Laura, School A). Relational trust was developed by establishing professional connections with teachers and engaging in ongoing dialogue with them. Champions and principals showed genuine interest in teachers practice and informally spent time in their classrooms, talking with them and observing pedagogical practice such as opportunities for play. Principal Laura (School A) explained that time spent with teachers "tells the teacher I am noticing your practice; I am noticing your children, I have an interest in what you are doing professionally." Informal dialogue was explained to also make teachers feel valued. Principal Angela (School B) described finding "areas of praise and areas of recognition that values the gifts of who they are." Acknowledging teachers' strengths was reported to contribute to relational trust while also boosting teacher's self-efficacy (Edwards-Groves & Gootenboer, 2021). This was illustrated by a Kindergarten teacher who commented, "it gives you a little bit more confidence in what you are doing" (School A). As relational trust was built, dialogue became deeper and teachers felt comfortable to focus on improvement.

When teachers trusted the champions and principals they were described as feeling comfortable sharing their pedagogical interests and challenges. Principal Angela (School B)

concluded “as that personal relationship evolved” conversations revealed “what they would like to do by way of extending” and “what I could do to grow professional knowledge.” Continued discussions about pedagogical practice enabled change to be enacted and improvement to be ongoing, as principal Laura (School A) advised, “in terms of ticking it along...you’ve got to keep the dialogue going.” The professional and emotional support teachers required to enable them to continue implementing change was also revealed through ongoing dialogue.

Ongoing dialogue revealed teacher’s concerns and challenges and enabled ECPLs to provide responsive support. Principal Laura (School A) concluded that sustainable improvement involved being “responsive to all those little hiccups along the way.” She explained, “if we feel our staff are feeling a bit daunted by what’s going on, it’s like, ‘Okay, let’s just pull back a bit’ and let them have some time.” Champion Liz (School C) identified that connection and dialogue with teachers gave her insight into their personal lives and enabled her to provide emotional support. She said,

...you don’t know what they’re going through unless you spend time with them.

Somebody’s not going to tell you what’s happening at home in a meeting, but they will over a cup of tea. And that affects their teaching, and their relationship with the children and understanding that helps me to help them do their job better.

Teachers believed that professional and emotional support made them feel valued, which contributed to relational trust and mutual respect (Denee & Thornton, 2017). One Kindergarten teacher confirmed feeling “supported as a person and not just as a teacher.” She explained feeling a desire to “give back” and “do more as a sign of respect.” Relational trust also enabled collaborative learning and reflection to transpire; another key element of leading pedagogical change.

Collaborative learning and reflection

Teachers, champions and principals came together in each school to engage in collaborative learning and reflection. Principals and champions created the conditions for communities of practice to be developed by scheduling regular meeting time and leading with a clear direction for improvement. Improvement was also communicated to teachers as a slow and

gradual process which principal Angela (School B) described as, “small piece by small piece because once you start, things grow.” Principal Laura (School A) recalled also prefacing the challenges that may be experienced with change. She advised, “being visible about your expectations, we are doing this and we’re not going to back away from it, and yes, it will get tough but we’re going to keep going.” Assisting teachers to understand the process of pedagogical improvement enabled them to embrace change and understand their role within that process (Colmer, 2017; Daft, 2016). A significant part of that process involved collaborative professional learning and reflection.

Shared understandings of early childhood pedagogy were developed between principals, champions and early childhood teachers as they collaborated together in professional learning and reflection. Opportunities for extending collective understanding arose through discussions about research and professional reading, policy including the practices and standards of the EYLF and NQS and debriefing about visits to other schools. Professional learning and discussion topics were also based on champion and principal observations and monitoring. One champion described facilitating team meetings based on observations of practice and conversations with teachers, noting “it’s really about listening and understanding what they need” (Liz, School C). Teachers commented they were also able to raise their own challenges and concerns with the team to draw on collective knowledge and experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Siraj & Hallet, 2014). Daft (2016) asserts that through ongoing dialogue a vision for improvement becomes shared and momentum towards that shared vision is maintained. In addition to discussions, teachers were also encouraged to share practice within teams.

Encouraging teachers to share practice contributed to the development of deeper and shared understandings of pedagogy. During collaborative meetings teachers across the three sites were described and observed sharing new practices they had trialled in their classrooms. During one meeting sharing ideas and experiences focussed on engaging with families and assisting parents to be actively involved in their children’s learning (School A). In another meeting a Kindergarten teacher was observed sharing a video application that she had used to document children’s agency (School C). Champion Liz concluded, “our biggest resource is each other” and acknowledged “it’s learning from them as much as them

learning from me.” The teachers, champions and principals in each school were learning alongside one another, free of traditional hierarchical structures (Fullan, 2019). Reflection was promoted by champions and principals in addition to professional learning.

Teachers were encouraged to reflect as they engaged in various forms of professional learning and implemented changes to their pedagogical practice. One principal encouraged teachers to reflect on how they were embedding elements of play-based learning into practice by asking questions such as, “how is it working now, how does it feel? ... Are you starting to see a change?” and “what’s worked well? What hasn’t worked well?” (Laura, School A). Champion Liz reported that reflecting on changes enabled teachers to make intentional decisions about whether those changes should continue or stop. She explained, “there are some things we go that doesn’t work, not going to happen again.” She concluded that giving teachers the opportunity to take ownership of the changes increased their commitment to pedagogical improvement, noting “then I get their support 100%.” Teachers were additionally encouraged to question existing practices as they continued to implement change.

Allowing teachers to question current practice was believed to assist in improving practice. One Kindergarten teacher reported feeling valued and respected by being afforded with the power to question existing practice, particularly when it misaligned or inhibited change (School A). Recalling an example, she recounted advising the champion and principal, “we are trying to implement this play-based [learning] and our assessment is just too much to actually fit in with that.” She recalled the principal and champion were responsive and asked “how can we adjust it?” The principal concluded that by allowing teachers to question practice they could identify barriers that she may have missed. She said, “once you give people the power to question stuff, you can’t take that back. It’s about being a bit brave to let it go. So, by getting out of the way, we’ve got there a little bit faster.” Teachers were encouraged to reflect in an ongoing manner as they continued to plan and implement change. During observed meetings, teachers were heard reflecting on assessment processes, documentation and learning experiences. One champion was heard prompting critical reflection by posing questions such as, “is it a learning opportunity or just a worksheet?” and “is there a better way that we could capture their understanding?” Reflective practice promotes critical thinking and assists teachers to consider how

improvement can be made to current practice (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Colmer (2017) suggests that positional leaders play a significant role in nurturing critical reflection and creating the conditions in which critical reflection can take place.

Creating psychological safety was necessary for teachers to comfortably engage with professional growth and critical reflection. This included creating an environment in which teachers could learn and reflect collaboratively, offer new ways of thinking or implement innovative ideas into practice without fear of retribution. Champion Liz (School C) described “giving people the opportunity to take risks and giving people the opportunity to try something to change, do something different because we don’t know if it’s going to work unless we try it.” Liz was observed explicitly explaining to teachers that not all changes to practice would be successful and described this to be part of the learning process. She was heard making statements such as “it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t work well.” Psychological safety and relational trust have been described as creating opportunities for teachers to securely challenge and question practice which is necessary to develop shared understandings (Denee & Thornton, 2017; Murray & McDowell Clark, 2013). A third element in how pedagogical change was led included empowering teachers as decision makers in the process of improvement.

Empowering teachers as decision makers

Across the three schools there was a common belief that teachers needed to be involved in decision making because they had valuable ideas about how change could be implemented. Principal Laura (School A) described asking teachers for their input saying, “we do need to get here, but what’s the next practical step? You provide me with advice.” Champion Liz (School C) explained “trusting” teachers as “professionals” and stated “sometimes they know better than I do.” Teachers confirmed their involvement in collective decision making, such as one Kindergarten teacher who stated, “it’s not a decision just from up there, we’re all involved.” Teachers also professed their involvement as decision-makers made them feel that their professional knowledge and experience was respected. One Pre-primary teacher commented, “leaders in the school respect our knowledge and want our input.” Teachers were active contributors and decision-makers during observations of team meetings. Champions were heard frequently asking questions of teachers to elicit their input and ideas

to make shared decisions. Principals concluded that shared decision-making and ownership over change enhanced teachers' interest and commitment to improvement.

Teacher decision-making extended to how and when they would implement change in their classrooms with the belief that teacher autonomy and decision-making motivated teachers to enact change. One principal commented, "if you haven't evoked an interest...it's just sheer torture. It's like trying to drag a mule uphill when he wants to be down there" (Angela, School B). Another deduced that autonomy enhanced teacher engagement and interest in change. She proposed "it is about putting the idea out there, giving them the idea and the enthusiasm behind it and allowing them time to do it when they need and want to do it" (Liz, School C). Teachers expressed appreciation in having autonomy to enact changes in a way that suited their level of understanding and comfort. One Pre-primary teacher described being encouraged to use her own ideas to "figure out how I want to do it." She relayed not feeling pressure which she reported increased her confidence, creativity and enjoyment of the job. Colmer (2017) suggests that empowering teachers as contributors to decision-making positively influences their professional identity, increasing their confidence and ability to embrace change.

Teacher autonomy has been similarly found in previous studies, including research by Kirk and Barblett (2021) who found psychological ownership led to teachers adopting genuine interest and acceptance of change which could then be sustained over time. Empowering teachers as active decision makers also contributes to maintaining relational trust and mutual respect (Goleman, 2019). Furthermore, when pedagogical leaders generate teacher ownership they foster collective leadership and a shared responsibility and commitment for ongoing pedagogical improvement which leads to greater success sustaining the implementation of collective goals (Fullan, 2019; O'Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018).

Implications and Conclusions

Pedagogical leadership has become increasingly important within ECEC amidst the current climate of policy reforms and pedagogical tensions. Three case studies grounded in lived experience revealed four significant findings that suggest who could lead early childhood pedagogy in schools and how they might lead ongoing improvement. Knowledgeable and

experienced early childhood champions can effectively lead colleagues to implement pedagogical change including the inclusion of play-based learning. By developing relational trust, establishing communities of practice and empowering teachers as decision makers, change to pedagogical practice was both possible and sustainable.

While these findings shed some light on who should lead early childhood pedagogy in schools and how, they raise further questions as the role is not well defined or understood. Pedagogical leadership is an important element of quality improvement and necessary for positive learning outcomes for children. We hope these findings provoke conversations around who is best placed to lead early childhood pedagogy in schools and how principals determine who takes responsibility for this role. Further consideration and research are also warranted to better understand how to prepare teachers for leadership roles and to understand the guidelines and infrastructure that would assist early childhood pedagogical leaders to effectively lead pedagogical improvement in schools. Without further attention being given to the role of ECPL in schools, teachers will continue to be left without support (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) while children's rights to quality provision and play-based learning will remain compromised.

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